

THE COLIN ATKINS STORY

Neil Rathmell

CAST

in order of appearance

Mr Atkins

Mrs Atkins

Doreen Atkins

Colin Atkins

Policeman

Brenda

1957. The sitting room of a pre-war terrace house somewhere in Britain.

Mr Atkins appears behind, wearing pyjamas. He brushes his teeth, washes his face, combs what remains of his hair.

Enter Mrs Atkins, in front, returning from the shops. She calls upstairs to Mr Atkins.

MRS ATKINS

Are you up yet?

Mr Atkins appears not to hear her. Mrs Atkins waits for a reply, then shakes her head and goes out with the shopping. She returns a moment later and calls upstairs again.

Tommy?

Mr Atkins still fails to hear. Mrs Atkins takes off her coat and addresses the audience.

I'm sorry about this. He'll be down in a minute. We seem to be having one of those mornings.

She calls upstairs again.

Tommy! They're here!

Still no response from Mr Atkins. Mrs Atkins goes out with her coat, returning almost at once and addressing the audience.

I'm Mrs Atkins, by the way. I'm ever so sorry to have to keep you waiting. We're just waiting for my husband to come down and then we'll get started.

Pause.

Won't keep you long.

She smiles reassuringly. Enter Doreen, looking cross. She glances briefly at the audience, then addresses her mother.

DOREEN

What's the matter, mum? Why aren't we starting?

MRS ATKINS

We're just waiting for your father, love.

DOREEN

Where is he?

MRS ATKINS In the bathroom.

DOREEN Doesn't he know everybody's waiting?

MRS ATKINS Well, love, I have shouted for him. Two or three times. But you know what he's like.

DOREEN He does this every time.

MRS ATKINS I know, love. But what can I do? The more I try to hurry him up, the longer it seems to take him.

DOREEN He only does it to be awkward.

Pause.

You'll just have to start without him.

MRS ATKINS Ooh, no, love, I couldn't do that. I'd never hear the end of it.

DOREEN You'll have to. It's his own fault. He should get up like everybody else. Just start. It'll serve him right.

She turns to go, glancing briefly again at the audience. She speaks to her mother again before she goes out.

Just start, mum.

Exit Doreen. Mrs Atkins smiles again at the audience, apologetically.

MRS ATKINS I don't know what can be keeping him.

Pause.

I'm sure he won't be long.

Pause.

DOREEN (off) Just start, mum!

Mrs Atkins speaks in a stage whisper to Doreen.

MRS ATKINS I don't know what he says.

DOREEN (off) Read it then.

MRS ATKINS I haven't got a script.

Doreen comes on briefly and hands a script to Mrs Atkins.

Oh. Right. He's not going to like it. Oh well.

Mrs Atkins faces the audience again.

Sorry to keep you. We've decided to start without him.

Reads from the script.

Prologue. It is now a well-established fact of contemporary British history that, in the world as it was before the 1950s, there were no teenagers. Shakespeare wrote of the seven ages of man, but in the immediate post-war years such fine distinctions would have been over-subtle. There were children, adults and OAPs. Certain sub-categories existed – babies, toddlers, students, apprentices, women – but none of them was of any significance compared with the three major generation groups: adults, children and pensioners. So where did teenagers come from? Because by the 60s, Britain was full of them. For over fifty years, the origin of the British teenager has remained a mystery. But now, that mystery has at last been solved. Scientists believe that they have discovered not only the identity of the first British teenager, but the exact day on which he came into being. We invite you to watch a dramatic reconstruction of the events of that momentous day. The story begins on the morning of the 3rd of October, 1957, in the home of Mr and Mrs Atkins.

Mr Atkins has left the bathroom and now joins Mrs Atkins in the living room.

About time too! Where have you been?

MR ATKINS Upstairs.

MRS ATKINS Everybody's been waiting for you. We just had to start without you in the end.

MR ATKINS I'm sorry.

MRS ATKINS You're not even dressed.

MR ATKINS What?

MRS ATKINS Look at you! You show me up every time.

MR ATKINS No, I don't.

MRS ATKINS Yes, you do.

MR ATKINS No, I don't.

MRS ATKINS Yes, you do.

MR ATKINS No, I don't. Now come on, let's get started.

Turns to audience.

It is now a well-established fact of contemporary British history that in the world as it was before the...

MRS ATKINS I've done that.

MR ATKINS What?

MRS ATKINS I've done it.

MR ATKINS What?

MRS ATKINS The prologue. I've done it.

Pause.

MR ATKINS Oh, well, thank you very much! That's only my best speech! Remind me not to bother coming at all next time!

MRS ATKINS I had to do it, Tommy. Everybody was waiting.

MR ATKINS Yes! For me!

MRS ATKINS No, they weren't.

MR ATKINS Yes, they were! That's my speech!

MRS ATKINS Oh, for goodness sake, if it's that important to you, let's do it again.

MR ATKINS I'm not doing it again.

MRS ATKINS Well, stop moaning then.

MR ATKINS I'm not moaning.

MRS ATKINS Yes, you are.

MR ATKINS No, I'm not. I just don't expect to come down in the morning and find all my speeches have been done by other people.

MRS ATKINS All my speeches! You do exaggerate, Tommy. One speech.

MR ATKINS Yes! My best one!

MRS ATKINS One little speech and we never hear the end of it! Anybody would think it was all you had to say.

MR ATKINS Oh, I can't be bothered to argue.

MRS ATKINS No, because you know you're in the wrong. If you got yourself up in the morning instead of lying in bed till all hours, we wouldn't need to do your speeches for you.

Pause. Mr Atkins sulks. Mrs Atkins watches him.

Something's happened to you, Tommy. You never used to be like this. You used to be such a – such a vigorous man. Hard-working. Ambitious. And look at you now. You haven't even got a job.

MR ATKINS I'll get a job.

MRS ATKINS When?

MR ATKINS I'll get one. It's not easy adjusting to civilian life after six years in the army. I've fought a war, you know.

MRS ATKINS The war ended twelve years ago. How long does it take to adjust?

Pause.

MR ATKINS Twelve years?

MRS ATKINS Pull yourself together, Tommy. Please. Before it's too late.

Exit Mrs Atkins. Pause.

MR ATKINS She's right. Things were different somehow before the war. I had a job then. A good steady job. I knew what I was doing. And why. I was doing it for her. And the kids we were going to have. Then the war came. And the kids. And afterwards it wasn't the same somehow. Peacetime doesn't seem to have much to offer to a man like me. If it hadn't been for the war, I could have been a solid, reliable, God-fearing, industrious citizen. But things being what they are, I just don't seem to have the energy. Sometimes I almost wish Hitler had won.

Enter Doreen.

DOREEN Hello, dad.

MR ATKINS Hello, our Doreen.

Doreen addresses the audience.

DOREEN Thus our dramatist, with admirable economy, pencils in the historical background necessary to a proper understanding of the events which are to follow. The father disenchanted with life in post-war Britain, the mother disenchanted with the father, and now the children, disenchanted with all three. And you must remember that at this stage, although one is fourteen, the other fifteen, they are children. The concept, 'teenager', does not yet exist.

Enter Mrs Atkins

MRS ATKINS Hello, our Doreen. What are you doing home at this time?

DOREEN We've got a half-holiday.

MRS ATKINS Honestly, Doreen! I wish you'd told me. I've got nothing for your dinner. I shall have to go to the shop again.

DOREEN Sorry, mum.

MRS ATKINS I shall be behindhand all day now. Tommy, you'll have to peel some potatoes while I'm out. Give him a hand, Doreen. You know what he's like. I do wish you'd told me.

Exit Mrs Atkins.

MR ATKINS What's the half-holiday for, Doreen?

DOREEN Fiona Ramsbottom in the Upper Sixth has got a scholarship to Oxford.

MR ATKINS I never liked the Ramsbottoms. Old Ramsbottom made his money in the war, when men like me were giving their lives.

DOREEN I never knew you gave you life.

MR ATKINS There's a lot you don't know.

DOREEN Obviously.

Pause.